



Research Article

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Evaluating the Accuracy of Props in Chinese Historical Costume Dramas Based on Research into Song Dynasty Porcelain Culture: A Case Study of Porcelain Props in the Drama *The Story of MingLan*

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Abstract: In an era of fast-food culture where entertainment often overshadows substance, a rigorous examination of Chinese culture should be conducted through the dissemination of entertainment, which is crucial for ensuring the public's accurate understanding and interpretation of the culture. Movies and TV dramas, as vehicles of entertainment, often prioritize box office performance and online ratings as key metrics of success. Characters and plots may be fictional, but for those movies and TV dramas rooted in historical and cultural contexts, showcasing the essence of history and culture is of significance and necessity for the accuracy of such cultural depictions. Its significance lies in the faithful transmission of culture, while its necessity involves guiding the public toward a correct cultural understanding. This paper examines the porcelain culture depicted in the historical drama *The Story of MingLan* as a case study. The aim is not to utterly negate the effort put into the show's props but rather to identify relevant issues and to analyze and discuss the discrepancies between the drama's porcelain props and authentic artifacts/paintings from the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

Keywords: Chinese historical costume drama; Porcelain; Props; Politics and rights; Tangible verification; Accuracy and inaccuracy

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1. Current Situation and Issues of Porcelain Prop Usage in Chinese Historical Costume Dramas

Chinese historical costume dramas are set against the backdrop of a specific period in ancient China. The playwriting and performance are based on historical events or figures, or entirely fictional narratives. But the premise remains that the story unfolds in a defined historical era. Consequently, all props and cultural elements in the drama must align with or predate that time instead of postdating it, which is cultural and historical common sense. In today's flourishing entertainment market where film and television industries thrive, various genres dazzle on screen, captivating audiences. Yet, beneath this glamour, the current situation of prop usage has sparked widespread concern and serious reflection.

A closer look at contemporary Chinese historical costume dramas reveals lamentable cultural inaccuracies. Anachronistic dialogue—often peppered with modern expressions—is already a fact. Historical architectural settings are also frequently overlooked due to budget constraints, with readily available locations as substitutes. However, the most obvious issues lie in the use of movable props in historical dramas. The main problems are listed as follows [1]:

- Temporal displacement of props—the chronological misalignment of objects, where props depict items that did not exist in the specified historical period [2];
- Spatial displacement of props—the inappropriate placement of objects in settings where they would not historically have appeared [3];
- Social-class displacement of props—the mismatch between props and the social hierarchy, disregarding historical regulations on usage based on social class [4];
- Functional displacement of props—the incorrect portrayal of an object’s functions in a certain period;
- Technological displacement of props—the misrepresentation of manufacturing techniques, where props exhibit craftsmanship that was not developed in the depicted era.

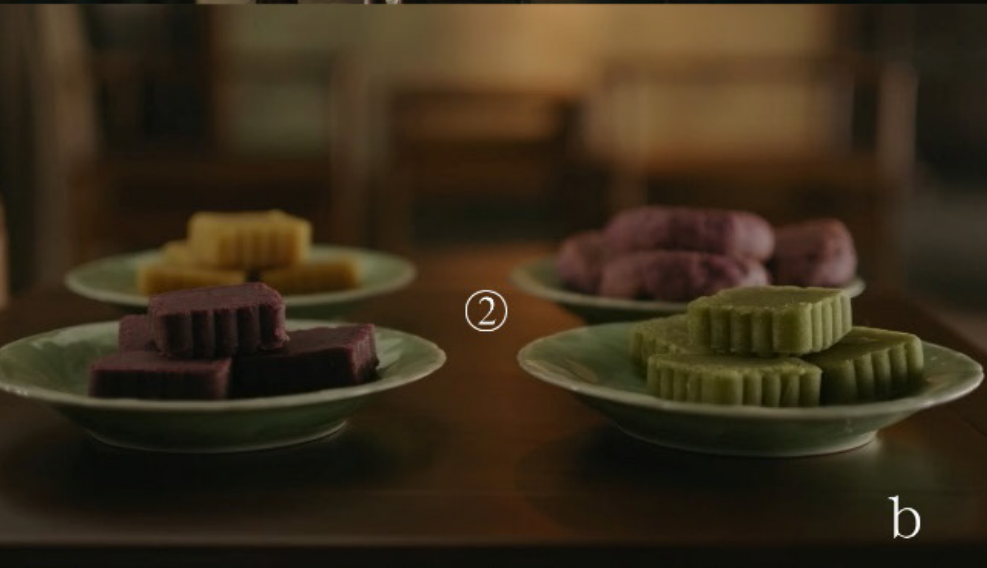
2. Research Background

Existing research on props in Chinese historical costume dramas primarily takes two forms: online commentary and historical comparisons, both documented and shared in written forms. Online commentaries tend to focus on plotlines, actors, characters, and costumes, emphasizing entertainment value and visual aesthetics, while historical comparisons center on the historical accuracy and authenticity of plot development, character portrayals, costumes, and set designs [5].

An examination of these written records reveals that, regardless of format, the discourse invariably revolves around two key dimensions: entertainment and “authenticity.” However, assessments of “authenticity” are generally limited to comparisons with historical facts, with little in-depth scrutiny of specific prop details. This situation is understandable, as meticulous verification of such details requires extensive data sources and interdisciplinary collaboration to achieve a high degree of accuracy [6]. Given these constraints, this study narrows its focus to the tangible verification of the porcelains and craftsmanship depicted in a historical costume drama *The Story of MingLan*, aiming to address issues of inaccuracy in these aspects.

3. Methodology

Analyzing the accuracy of props in this drama is primarily based on the application of ancient porcelain culture within its specific social context. Therefore, specimen-based methodology and comparative methodology are employed in the research.



- ① Southern Song Dynasty Yue kiln green-glazed shouldered ewer;
- ② Jin-Yuan Period Longquan kiln green-glazed plate;
- ③ Southern Song Dynasty Longquan kiln plum-green-glazed lotus petal bowl;
- ④ Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed lotus-petal-carved hat-shaped bowl;
- ⑤ Imitated Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed lobed dish with recessed waist;
- ⑥ Basin, unknown origin;
- ⑦ Southern Song Dynasty Yue kiln green-glazed ribbed melon-shaped ewer;
- ⑧ Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed wine cup and saucer (or Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed wine cup and saucer);
- ⑨ Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed small dish (or Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed small dish).

Figure 1. Porcelain Props in the TV Drama *The Story of MingLan* (provided by the authors)



- ① Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed ewer with incised floral design, and lotus-petal-mouthed warming bowl;
- ② Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed lotus-petal-carved hat-shaped bowl;
- ③ Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed lotus-petal-carved hat-shaped bowl;
- ④ Longquan kiln green-glazed ribbed foliate-rim cup with frame-lined saucer.

Note: The figure legend is based on observations of props, judging from craftsmanship, form, glaze color, and approximate period. As the props here are either replicas or imaginative recreations, the assessments may have inaccuracies. Comparative analyses with reference specimens will follow with illustrated annotations.

Figure 2. Porcelain Props in the TV Drama *The Story of MingLan* (provided by the authors)

(A) Specimen-Based Methodology

This method involves systematic and detailed discussion from multiple perspectives, including the social background, hierarchical systems, cultural customs, and technological developments of the period in question [7].

(B) Comparative Methodology

This methodology entails comparing and correcting the porcelain props used in historical costume dramas against authentic porcelain artifacts from the era, focusing on their forms, craftsmanship, glaze colors, and usage.

4. Problems with Porcelain Props in the Historical Costume Drama *The Story of MingLan*

This paper takes the porcelain props in the historical costume drama *The Story of MingLan* as a case study for analysis. The drama is set against the background of a scholar-official family in the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), seeking to depict the lifestyle and cultural value of the upper class during that period. Accordingly, in that historical context, the analysis of porcelain culture in the drama is conducted on four categories, i.e., food ware, wine vessels, tea ware, and incense utensils. By examining the usage and forms of porcelain props in these categories, the study identifies and corrects inaccuracies. Furthermore, these categories serve as a lens to explore the role and significance of Song Dynasty porcelain culture in social activities, thereby enhancing our understanding of Song society and the continuity of Han cultural traditions [8].

In the drama, food ware and wine vessels primarily include bowls, plates, basins, pots, warming bowls, wine cups and saucer (**Figure 1** and **Figure 2**).

For the drama, the prop crew conducted some preparatory research on Northern Song culture. For average audiences primarily focused on plot development, the porcelain props' details might escape notice at first glance. Superficially, the team avoided blatant anachronisms by predominantly using celadon, white porcelain, bluish-white porcelain, and Jianzhan teacup—creating no immediate visual dissonance. However, for the Northern Song porcelain research, significant oversights emerge in the details, with primary inaccuracies in the following aspects.

4.1. Inaccurate Reproduction of Forms (**Figure 1c, 3–6; Figure 2b, 1–4**)

The imitated Northern Song Ding kiln white-glazed lobed dish with recessed waist (**Figure 1c, 5**) exhibits a flared trumpet-shaped mouth—an obvious manual shaping rather than the natural sagging deformation characteristic of thin-bodied porcelain during firing.

The bluish-white-glazed lotus-petal-carved hat-shaped bowl (**Figure 2b, 3**) shows its biggest error in the folded rim. The examination of Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed specimens confirms no such form existing in Northern Song, making this bowl undoubtedly

a modern potter's fantasy.

Longquan kiln melon-ridged floral-mouth cup and saucer (**Figure 2b, 4**) contains multiple flaws:

- The pronounced melon-ridged fluting (especially spiral variants) never appeared in authenticated Northern Song Longquan specimens;
- Although frame motifs did exist on Northern Song porcelains, its design was strictly limited to crabapple flower pattern, heart-shaped cloud pattern, or auspicious *ruyi*-style cloud pattern—never modern heart shape but delicate and small in proportion [9].

4.2. Inaccurate Reproduction of Craftsmanship Techniques (**Figure 1c, 3–6; Figure 2b, 1–4**)

While maintaining a water-drop silhouette, the imitated Hutian kiln bluish-white-glazed ewer with incised floral patterns (**Figure 2b, 1**) features an overly crude junction between ewer neck and body. And the lotus-petal-mouthed warming bowl (**Figure 2b, 1**) has an excessively bulky form that loses the characteristic lightness, refinement, and delicacy of authentic Northern Song Hutian ware. Furthermore, the incised floral patterns and techniques differ significantly from the decorative styles of either Hutian or Ding kilns.

The bluish-white-glazed lotus-petal-carved hat-shaped bowl (**Figure 2b, 3**) presents another technical inaccuracy. Authentic Northern Song Hutian ware never executed double-sided carving in this manner. Firstly, interior and exterior patterns were never identical in that period. Secondly, the translucence of thin-bodied bluish-white porcelain would create visual chaos when backlit, as the incised patterns from both sides would interfere optically.

4.3. Inaccurate Prop Usage under Ritual Regulation

According to ancient Chinese ritual regulations, utensils bearing totemic or religious motifs were strictly reserved for sacrificial rites, religious enshrinement or imperial use. Their employment by commoners or even nobility constituted a grave breach of regulations. As exemplified by the items 3 and 4 in **Figure 1c**, and the item 3 in **Figure 2b**, strictly speaking, the inclusion of utensils with such motifs violates the ritual regulations of that historical period, resulting in cultural misinterpretation and distortion.

5. Examination of Song Dynasty Porcelain Categories and Lifestyle

The Chinese have always lived by the principle of “seven daily necessities”—fuel, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea. Though alcohol is not listed among these necessities, it has never been absent from the dietary culture of Chinese daily life. Food culture, therefore, runs through the entire thread of cultural development across China's dynasties, giving birth to related utensils—from primitive painted pottery to bronze ware, from Warring States Period (475-221BC) and Han Dynasty (206BC-220) lacquerware to early porcelain. These artifacts serve as tangible evidence of life in the agricultural society.



Figure 3. *Along the River during the Qingming Festival*, ink and color on silk, 24.8cm × 528.7 cm, by Zhang Zeduan, Northern Song Dynasty, collected by Palace Museum, Beijing (provided by the authors)

During the Northern Song Dynasty, people placed a high value on life quality and lifestyle attitudes, as can be identified from the paintings and surviving artifacts of that time. For instance, Zhang Zeduan (1085–1145)’s painting *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* (**Figure 3**) vividly depicts the daily life of commoners in Bianliang (today’s Kaifeng), the Northern Song capital. Besides, the painting *Literary Gathering* (**Figure 4**) by Northern Song Emperor Huizong (Zhao Ji, 1082–1135) captures the elegant demeanor of the scholar-official class under imperial authority.

The porcelain culture of the Northern Song Dynasty can be broadly categorized into three major types based on daily life: utilitarian utensil (UU), decorative utensil (DU), and religious and sacrificial utensil (RSU). UU and RSU sometimes overlap in terms of utensil names but differ in form and decorative motifs [10]. For example, bowls, cups, and plates in the UU category were often plain-colored or decorated with non-religious motifs, such as sunflower, chrysanthemum, water ripple, orchid, butterfly, or bird patterns. In contrast, RSU featured intricate carving and incised motifs with religious and sacrificial symbolism, such as lotus petal, swastika, or six-petal gardenia patterns.

Figure 4a. Utensils in Northern Song Emperor Huizong’s painting *Literary Gathering* (provided by the authors)





- ① Northern Song Dynasty Ding kiln white-glazed wine cup and saucer (or Yue Kiln mise celadon wine cup and saucer);
- ② Northern Song Dynasty Ru kiln flat-bottomed washer (or Ding kiln white-glazed flat-bottomed dish);
- ③ Northern Song Dynasty Yue kiln mise celadon bowl (or Ding kiln white-glazed bowl);
- ④ Northern Song Dynasty stemmed plate;
- ⑤ Northern Song Dynasty Yue kiln mise celadon shouldered ewer with warming bowl;
- ⑥ Northern Song Dynasty Yue kiln green-glazed jar;
- ⑦ Northern Song Dynasty green-glazed wine cup with black-glazed cup saucer;
- ⑧ Northern Song Dynasty green-glazed flared-rim plate;
- ⑨ Northern Song Dynasty green-glazed wine jar (practical term for plum blossom vase);

Note: Due to the darkened coloration of the painting, the exact kiln origins and glaze colors cannot be determined with certainty. Identifications are made primarily based on vessel shapes.

Figure 4b. Utensils in Northern Song Emperor Huizong's painting *Literary Gathering* (provided by the authors)

Another example is incense burner. In UU category, incense burners were typically small in size, simple in form, and minimally decorated. They were used in study room or tea room for fragrance enjoyment and mental focus, distinct from the religious behavior of chanting scriptures or offering prayers when there was RSU. Utilitarian incense burner does not develop a sense of religious ritual, but rather a habit of leisurely and refined living. The term “habit” is used here to emphasize the refined taste and quality of Song Dynasty life, in contrast to the forced pretensions of elegance often seen in modern lifestyles [11].

The leisurely refined life of Song Dynasty scholar-officials derived its essence from naturalness rather than rituals. The concept of naturalness manifests in three fundamental dimensions:

(A) Human-Nature Harmony

Song Dynasty paintings—landscape painting, bird-and-flower painting, and particularly landscape portraiture—position human figures in between the heaven and the earth. Depictions of individuals observing scenery, resting, laboring, or traveling (**Figure 5**) articulate the Song intellectuals' attitude and yearning for the nature.

(B) Human-Object Naturalness

Song Dynasty porcelains evidence this, featuring monochromatic glazes, tonal glazes, and single-fired glazes. These porcelains witnessed the prevalence of biomimetic adornments, such as reality-like flowers and carved botanical motifs. Compared to later periods, Song artisans achieved superior biomimetic technique, mirroring the literati's restrained expression and cultivated moderation in both artistic and personal conduct.



Figure 5. *Spring Banquet Scroll* (detail), silk, 23 × 573 cm, anonymous, Southern Song Dynasty, collected by Palace Museum, Beijing (provided by the authors)

(C) Interpersonal Naturalness

Song Dynasty paintings reveal unconstrained human behavior and facial expressions as well as interpersonal harmony. The elegance and subtlety of Song Dynasty porcelain lie in

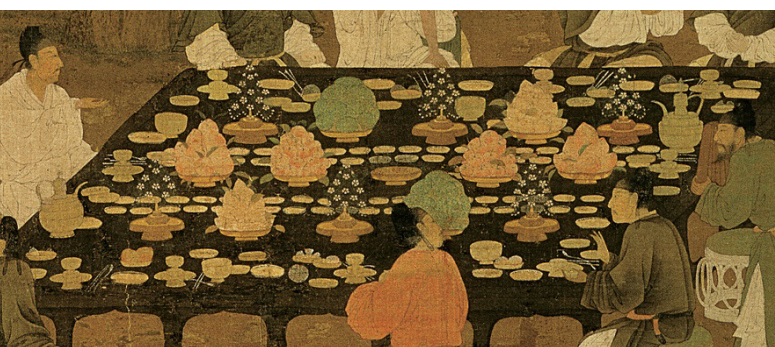
their forms and glazes (**Figure 6**). In China, most porcelain lovers know the saying, “celadon in the south, white porcelain in the north,” that is, southern kilns predominantly produced green-glazed porcelain, while northern kilns specialized in white-glazed porcelain [12]. As for westerners’ reference to “Chinese white,” it involves the white porcelain from the Ming Dynasty Dehua kilns in the south, which falls outside the scope of this discussion. Actually, based on collections in major museums, ongoing discoveries of kiln sites, and surviving artifacts, it is evident that northern China during the Song Dynasty did produce green-glazed porcelain. From the late Tang (750-907) and Five Dynasties (907-979) to the Northern Song period, northern kilns, such as the famous Yaozhou, Jun, and Ru kiln systems, fired green-glazed wares, which were deeply influenced by southern China’s Yue kiln celadon. The Ru kiln green-glazed porcelain, in particular, show clear traces of Yue kiln forms from the Five Dynasties and early Northern Song.

Song Dynasty porcelain glazes can be broadly categorized into five major types: green, white, black, brown, and bluish-white (excluding other minor glaze colors from this discussion’s scope) (**Figure 7**).

One might speculate whether the dominant glaze colors of Song porcelain subtly align with the four directional totems of Chinese cosmology—the Azure Dragon (east), White Tiger (west), Vermilion Bird (south), and Black Tortoise (north)—symbolized by green, white, red, and black? If so, this resonance would further indicate the continuity of Chinese culture.

Literary Gathering and *Spring Banquet Scroll* illustrate the lifestyle of elite scholar-officials, while *Along the River during the Qingming Festival* presents a panorama of commoners’ daily existence. The refined leisure culture permeating Song society did not derive utterly from material wealth, but rather emerged as a top-down cultural phenomenon rooted in philosophical alignment with naturalness.

In *Along the River during the Qingming Festival*, there is a multitude of figures, events, settings, and scenes. Through those people, happenings, and objects, one can glimpse the prosperity of Bianliang (Kaifeng) and witness an orderly microcosm of society.



- ① ② Song Dynasty wine cup;
- ③ Song Dynasty flat-bottomed plate;
- ④ ⑤ Song Dynasty ring-foot plate;
- ⑥ ⑧ Song Dynasty flared-mouth bowl and hat-shaped bowl;
- ⑦ Song Dynasty bowl;
- ⑨ Song Dynasty lidded bowl;
- ⑩ Song Dynasty warming bowl;
- ⑪ ⑫ Song Dynasty ewer.

Note: The physical specimens are from the author's personal collection (for research and comparative purposes only).



Figure 6. Comparative analysis of similar physical specimens to utensils depicted in Northern Song Emperor Huizong’s *Literary Gathering* (detail) (provided by the authors)

- ① green glaze;
- ② white glaze;
- ③ black glaze;
- ④ brown glaze;
- ⑤ bluish-white glaze;



Figure 7. Five Major Categories of Song Dynasty Porcelain Glazes (provided by the authors)

6. The Cultural Guidance and Recommendations for Porcelain Props in Historical Costume Dramas

Historical costume dramas are fundamentally works of entertainment, yet as productions based on historical settings, they inherently assume an additional responsibility: to authentically reconstruct historical realities or at least maintain cultural accuracy in their historical context. Failure to uphold this responsibility carries significant consequences for public perception—a concern that is by no means alarmist. Over the past two decades, various “fictionalized retellings” and “historical romances” set in the Ming and Qing dynasties have distorted public cognition of history and culture. Many viewers with limited historical knowledge, particularly adolescents, mistakenly accept these dramas as factual, having negative effects on their proper historical and cultural perspectives.

The substantial influence of historical costume dramas stems from their mode of mass communication. As a vehicle of popular entertainment, their primary function is to amuse audiences and consume time, while their secondary effect lies in driving economic growth of the entertainment industry, benefiting both cast/crew and derivative products (e.g., daily necessities, cultural trends). On a positive side, such dramas serve as a superficial yet accessible medium for cultural dissemination. On the negative side, precisely because of their superficial and often inaccurate portrayals, they risk distorting historical and cultural truths. Given that most viewers lack specialized knowledge of history or material culture, the ethical imperative falls upon producers to ensure responsible representation and dissemination.

Some may argue that historical dramas are not documentaries and thus need not adhere to strict accuracy and authenticity. Perhaps they should reflect on this: How many actually watch documentaries? Instead, the vast disparity in viewership between entertainment media and educational documentaries is evidenced by rating data and age group analyses.

Therefore, this paper focuses specifically on porcelain props as a case study, employing comparative material analysis to identify areas requiring improvement. By cross-referencing on-screen artifacts with authentic historical porcelain, we highlight discrepancies and propose measures to enhance authenticity.

To ensure the role of historical costume dramas, particularly porcelain props, in guiding accurate cultural understanding, the following suggestions should be considered:

- Historical costume dramas should not focus predominantly on the lives of royalty and nobility, but rather adopt the perspective of common people's daily existence. Over the years, most of these dramas have revolved around palace intrigues and power struggles. This does not depict history—it is merely modern melodrama dressed in ancient costumes. The lives of ordinary people represent the true reality for the vast majority in those societies and serve as an authentic reflection of the entire social fabric. Moreover, such portrayals can help cultivate correct historical, cultural, and moral values among viewers.
- Historical research should be more rigorous, as it not only tests the comprehensive abilities of directors, producers, and screenwriters but also reflects their cultural literacy. Such research must extend beyond static elements like architecture, clothing, and artifacts to include dynamic aspects such as behavior, manners, and speech.
- Regarding the portrayal of porcelain culture in historical dramas, greater attention should be paid to details. Because porcelain reflect the lifestyles of the upper class and common people, serving as direct evidence of cultural aspects across the entire social hierarchy.
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The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.

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- Zhen Hou is a faculty member in the Department of Public Art at Jiangnan University, specializing in material aesthetics, cultural creative design, and traditional craftsmanship. Her work has been recognized with multiple national honors, including awards from the National Art Exhibitions and extensive support from the National Arts Fund. She also served as Image and Landscape Manager for the Beijing Olympics, receiving commendations for her contributions.
- Xiaoyun Ma, a teacher at Jiangnan University's School of Foreign Languages, focuses on English teaching and translation. She has received numerous national and provincial awards for teaching excellence and served as chief editor of the textbook *General English for Interpretation and Translation*.

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